

## Research group blogs: sites for self-presentation and collaboration<sup>1</sup>

**María José Luzón**

Universidad de Zaragoza

### 1. Introduction

The use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools by academics is resulting in profound changes in scholarly communication. Research analysing academic interaction through online tools, i.e. mailing lists, newsgroups (e.g., Sanderson, 1996; Rojo and Ragsdale, 1997), argues that these tools facilitate information exchange, creation of new contacts and collaboration between researchers. In spite of their recent appearance, Weblogs (blogs) are beginning to entice many academics to engage in online communication. Weblogs, defined by Herring *et al.* (2004: 1) as "frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence", have unique capabilities that make them specially useful for interaction and exchange of information: entries may be multimodal and offer information in different formats (text, sound, video), they can include links to other posts and to online resources, and tend to be followed by a "comment" button to enable interaction. These features have led to the emergence of new conversational practices among academics using weblogs (Mortensen and Walker, 2002). Academic weblogs facilitate the exchange of ideas and prompt discussion and debate, thus helping researchers interact and collaborate with a diverse audience. However, the exchange and publication of information is not the only use of academic blogs, and may not even be the most important one.

In this paper we focus on a specific type of academic blog: research group blogs. We seek to analyse the purposes for which entries in these blogs are used by academics and how the capabilities of weblogs contribute to achieving these purposes.

### 2. Blogs and academic blogs

Blogs are online genres which share features with standard webpages and with asynchronous computer-mediated communication (Herring *et al.*, 2004). They are frequently updated webpages, consisting of many relatively short posts, which tend to include the date, and a comment button so that readers can answer. Weblogs share structural features, e.g. hypertext links, archive, possibility to include images, comments allowed, search functions, calendar, link to email blog author (Herring *et al.*, 2004). However, they differ in terms of the types of entries they include. Blood (2002) uses content to distinguish between filters and personal journals. The entries of filters usually include a hypertext link to another page and the blogger's comments on the linked material. In personal journals, bloggers report on their lives and thoughts. Another type of weblog described in the literature is the "knowledge blog" (k-log). Kelleher and Miller (2006) define "knowledge blogs" as "the online equivalent of professional journals in which authors document new knowledge in their professional domains, including research progress, references, and observation." Academic weblogs are not a homogeneous whole, and most of them contain entries of different types and combine different functions. This is due to the fact that academic blogs are written by

very different types of bloggers (e.g., individual scholars, PhD students, research groups), who use this tool for various purposes.

Blogging has both benefits and risks for academics. Lawley (2004), reporting on a discussion on academic blogging, lists the following advantages of blogs for someone who wants to publish academic work or research: speed of publishing, spontaneity, ability to publish (and get feedback on) work in progress, increased personal voice, bypassing of the editorial process, increased distributed peer review. In addition, blogs enable scholars to establish connections with others and to build a searchable archive of ideas/observations, which can be used for later development. In spite of these benefits, there are still few academics that engage in blogging. Several reasons have been suggested: the risk of sharing information and having ideas stolen or attacked before the research is published, the fear of damaging credibility, the time that blogging takes away from more traditional research activities. Thus, when deciding whether to blog, and, most importantly, which information to include in blogs, scientists have to balance benefits and risks.

The driving force of scientific research and publishing is the scientists' need to show their competence and thus attain prestige and scientific reputation (Zuckerman, 1988). Publishing in peer-refereed literature is a way to communicate new knowledge and to get recognition for this knowledge. That way, publication is an evidence of productivity, which usually implies more funding to carry out research. Besides, the visibility and prestige that publication confers on the scientist may bring about other rewards: contact with potential collaborators, invitations to conferences and meetings, etc. Blogging in an academic weblog popular among the members of a scientific community may also help the scientist become visible and get some of the rewards of publishing.

### **3. Corpus and methodology**

The corpus for this research consists of 12 research group blogs (RG blogs). We use the term "research group blog" to refer to blogs used by a group of people working together on some area, e.g. blogs from research groups, from research centers and labs. Although there are many scholars who blog, RG blogs are still scarce and the area of research of many of them has to do with computing or interactive media.

In order to determine the purpose of the blogs, we analysed the content of the entries: the type of information (in any format) researchers post, the type and use of links, and the use of the "comment" component.

### **4. Results**

The entries in RG weblogs have varying purposes. While some RG weblogs seem to be quite formal and include mostly entries related to the academic sphere, others are more informal and also include personal items (e.g. congratulations, anecdote sharing). The analysis shows that entries in RG blogs have the following main purposes: (i) publicising the group and the group's research; (ii) making available to the public the RG members' work, usually with the purpose of getting feedback; (iii) communicating with other members of the group: organising and coordinating the group's work and managing knowledge exchange within the group; (iv) creating a sense of community,

becoming more visible in this virtual community and seeking collaboration easily; (v) social function: providing socioaffective support and reinforcing social links.

Let's see how the content of the entries contributes to these purposes:

1. Publicising the group and the group's research. One of the most frequent goals of entries in weblogs is to inform about the group's or the group members' achievements, thus showing the group's competence with the aim of attaining scientific reputation and establishing collaboration relationships. This publicity can take different forms:

a) Informing about new publications (acceptance of manuscript or of book proposal, article or book publication). The entries informing about manuscript acceptance always include a link to the reference and the abstract of the work that has been accepted. That way, they do not only show the group's competence but also make their work known and get it cited. Citation is an important criterion to measure researchers' productivity and is therefore essential to get funding and promotion. If the paper has already been published and is accessible online, there is a link to the paper.

b) Informing about conference participation, or participation in other types of events (courses, seminars).

c) Informing about members' new positions and achievements. These entries usually include very positive evaluative words to show the quality of the research or the relevance of the achievement.

d) Informing about the projects on which the group (or members of the group) is working, in order to spark collaboration. These entries give the most important information on the project and usually include a link to the project page (if available).

e) Commenting on the group's relationship network. Some entries inform about social activities with other members of the community (visits, etc.). These entries include links to the pages of the scholars with whom there is a relationship. Having an extensive group of collaborating researchers no doubt bestows prestige on the group.

f) Advertising their own events. Weblogs are sometimes used as board to announce conferences, courses, etc. organised by the group, and to link to the relevant pages of these events where more information is provided.

All these kinds of information provided in the weblogs act as the research group's presenting card: they describe the groups' interests, current projects, positions, social networks. Although most scholars' homepages also have a self-presentation purpose, the weblog adds currency to these pages.

2. Making available to the public the group members' work. Some blogs present research that is being developed, in order to ask for feedback. Links are a very useful tool in this kind of entries, since they allow the blogger to link to the paper/research/object on which he/she wants feedback. These entries usually encourage comments and request feedback directly or indirectly ("Let me know what you think of ...."; "Here is the article (link). Any comments would be appreciated"). Readers of blogs tend to provide feedback when requested (ideas, things missing from the draft that

the author could consider, questions, etc), thus giving way to discussions that help to construct shared knowledge. The blogger who requested feedback usually acknowledges the help from the others and shows the result of the revision in an update to the original entry. Sometimes, the entries do not ask for feedback to revise work under development, but invite comments on already completed work or published books or papers, in an attempt to spark discussion. In other cases, researchers bring to the weblog questions about their own research that have been posed in other forums.

3. Communicating with other members of the group and recording the group's activity. The weblog is a useful tool to share information that may be of interest to other members of the group (conferences, courses, talks). The entries usually include links to any page relevant to the event (e.g. the home page of the lecturer, articles on the concepts the lecture/course will deal with). In addition, the possibility to include comments allows the users to initiate a debate on the topic of the event. The weblog can also be used as a record of the group's activities, ideas, references comments, etc. The entries in most RG blogs are organised into different archives, which may be very helpful to look up and locate information.

4. Creating a sense of community seeking visibility and collaboration. Discussing topics of interest to various researchers and exchanging information or ideas on these topics helps to create a sense of community and in addition makes the researcher who contributes valuable ideas more visible for the community.

A blog post can be used by researchers to express their ideas/theories on a topic. A blog may include content similar to an online short journal article (even with links to other material, graphics, etc.), with the advantage that any researcher can publish any idea, even those that wouldn't be published in traditional refereed journals, and get it circulated and discussed (Paquet, 2005). However, this is not a frequent use in the blogs analysed. In our corpus the presentation of the researchers' ideas is usually motivated by someone else's question or by the desire to comment on others' work. The researcher usually answers the question providing links to his/her papers and to those of other researchers. Researchers also use blogs to provide a link to somebody else's paper/work and then comment on some specific point of the paper, showing his/her agreement or disagreement, providing a new perspective, contributing further to the ideas in the paper, etc. The comment button enables the readers to add their own opinion and engage in a discussion.

Another frequent use of entries is to inform about and review resources (new books/papers published, websites) related to specific areas of research. This may help researchers to filter the great amount of information published on a topic: a relevant resource will probably be reviewed in different blogs, so readers can make an informed decision about its value. Weblogs also inform of new websites or online resources (e.g. audio and video files, demos, etc) related to the topic, thus becoming a useful "search method" for this kind of resources.

In some cases, the main purpose of an entry in a weblog is to lead the users to a discussion/topic in another blog. The message simply includes a short quotation from the other blog, with a link to it. That way, the readers of both blogs are introduced to the conversation.

Other weblog entries are used to inform of a collaboration opportunity (participating in the construction of databases, webpages, an artistic collaboration, etc.) or to announce and provide links to events related to the blog topic (seminars, courses, etc.).

5. Social function. Blogs are a tool to reinforce social links and keep in touch with members of the discourse community. This is mainly achieved by posting supportive comments and personal anecdotes. Weblog entries can be used to congratulate group members on several academic occasions (PhD viva, new position).

Some entries contain the researcher's feelings, impressions, personal experiences and anecdotes, although virtually always related to their research activity. Researchers also make frequent use of blogs to give supporting advice and to offer tips that may be useful to the other members of the community. Some weblogs even have a category for humour, which may include jokes, funny things and cartoons.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has depicted weblogs as a tool that may be of great utility for researchers and for research groups in particular. Weblogs share features with traditional webpages and discussion lists, but have incorporated a great deal of unique capabilities and tools to meet the users' needs. The results of this paper suggest that RG weblogs have two main goals. They are, first, a site for self-presentation and for construction of the research group identity. The researchers themselves control what is published in their weblog and by presenting their research, ideas, publications, achievements, interests, etc., they seek to project an image of themselves as "competent members" of the community and to become more visible for the community. The other purpose of weblogs is to act as a site for collaboration in knowledge construction. Through weblogs researcher both give and receive valuable and speedy information and feedback on their research and ideas.

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